

Peggy Baker performs her own poignant, lyrical work

Peggy Baker with Mark Ryser at Summer Stages Dance, Concord, Thursday night.

By THEODORE BALE

The ability to command an audience without relying on sets, props or supporting dancers was once a rite of passage for any serious modern dancer, but these days few artists are willing or even able to go it alone. Peggy Baker's passionate dancing and resourceful choreography is a genuine assertion the solo form hasn't gone stale.

The Canadian-based choreographer made a rare local appearance Thursday night at Summer Stages Dance in Concord, where she has been in residency. Baker has been performing since 1974, first in Toronto, then, during the 1980s, with Lar Lubovitch Dance Company. She performed with Mikhail Baryshnikov and Mark Morris in the first season of White Oak Dance Project, then returned to Canada in 1990 to focus on her own choreography.

At age 48, Baker is clearly in a class with two other great choreographers of her generation, both known for their extraordinary solo work. Baker's flinging arms and confident abstractions remind one of Trisha Brown. And her talent at making highly theatrical dances without being deceptive recalls the poignant solos of Germany's Suzanne Linke. Baker's movement vocabulary is all her own, though, and it's characterized by an idiosyncratic clarity and spaciousness.

Opening the 50-minute program was "a true story," a highly formal work in three parts. The first section was a lush montage of sweeping arms, torso distortions and droll facial gestures performed in silence. Baker then restated the same material accompanied by a linguistic episode centered on the relationship between mother and daughter. The third section was nearly identical to the first, though performed at a much slower tempo. What a powerful lead for the three dances that followed.

"Strand" was one through-composed phrase of quirky pedestrian movements, most of it presented while Baker kept her feet firmly planted in one spot. Her sudden switch to pacing in a circle created an odd climax. The versatile pianist Marc Ryser provided a live performance of Ann Southam's introspective "Spatial View of Pond" as accompaniment.

An excerpt from Paul-Andre Fortier's "loin, tres loin" was lit only by a flashlight passed along the front row of the audience, an emotionally haunting duet for Baker and her own looming shadow.

In "furthermore," Baker resisted Cunningham's style and chose instead to treat John Cage's "Piano Music Number 2" as a lyrical melody visualized by elegant movement phrases, more evidence of her fresh, intelligent approach to choreography.



CHOREOGRAPHER Peggy Baker dazzles at a performance in Concord.